

Paper from Gilgit Conference '82

INDUS KOHISTAN

-An Ethnographic and Linguistic overview-

by

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During the Great Game, when the British officers were obsessed by the idea that Russian invasion was imminent, they moved the northwestern frontiers of the British Indian Empire forward to the main ranges of the Hindukush and Karakorum. In so doing, they "slammed the door" to the Cossacks who had already appeared in the Pamirs.

For the Britons, it was an integral part of their policy not to conquer the gorges of the Indus north of Tarbela and the adjacent tracts. Conquest would have required the construction of roads and bridges, and this infrastructure would have been only too helpful to an invading army in case of war.

Thus a large area on both sides of the river was allowed to remain Tribal Territory during the whole period of British rule: inaccessible, forbidden and of course, unexplored.

Before this decision came into effect, however, an intelligent and active Political Agent at Gilgit, John Biddulph, had collected a body of information about this area, information still relevant today. (Biddulph: Tribes of the Hindookush; Reprinted 1977 by Indus Publications Pakistan).

This tribal territory often called Vaghostan (land of the free) did not remain quite stable. Starting from Tangir, Pakhtun Wali Khan, a scion of the Khushwaqt family, tried to carve out his own kingdom which however collapsed when he was murdered by his freedom-loving subjects.

The Wali of Swat was more successful: in 1935, he added to his State all the valleys from the great bend of the Indus downwards. These western parts of Indus Kohistan were in later years visited by two European scholars, Aurel Stein and Frederik Barth. Their publications were the first scientific reports on that area made by eye-witnesses.

The situation remained virtually unchanged after partition. Only the valleys of Tangir and Darel chose to join the new Muslim state of their own free will. This enabled a German expedition in 1955 to study the area. The Austrian expedition

followed in 1958.

The areas inside of the great knee of the Indus east of the gorges however remained as they were: a blank spot on the linguistic and cultural map of Asia.

The opening of this last sanctuary took place when a road was built along the Indus. The Army Engineers and their Chinese counterparts later widened this road to form the Karakorum Highway. At the same time, the Government of Pakistan decided to include the valleys west of the Indus (formerly annexed by Swat) in the newly-created district of Kohistan. The full impact of these innovations was created only when the Kohistan Development Project Organization (the Kohistan Development Board of today -- the KDB) was created to carry out an intensive socio-economic uplift. It has the task to create a new infrastructure, to assimilate secluded valleys to the general standard of Pakistan.

Nevertheless, the previous linguistic and cultural situation soon to be lost to the past should be studied before such changes are fully effective in all spheres of life.

Brigadier (Ret'd) Jan Nadir Khan, the Chairman and Managing Director of the KDB, clearly saw the need for bridging this gap. He was instrumental in enabling me and my collaborator Mr. Adam Nayyar to undertake a preliminary exploration just for indicating the tasks of future systematic research. One part of the results, namely the lexicostatistical lists and the results of their comparison will be published by Mr. Nayyar in collaboration with Prof. G. Buddruss, the world expert on Dardic languages.

Brigadier Jan permitted us to use the facilities of the KDB and we were induced to enter the side-valleys, where we interviewed interested and well-informed personalities. It was a revealing experience to compare the area with the previous

situation prevailing in Tangir and Darel, valleys I had seen 25 years ago as a member of the expeditions mentioned above.

We could certainly not undertake more than a short survey, but some of our observation should be presented here, especially because they correct or supplement the few scientific reports written so far.

I. In the areas west of the Indus, a somewhat better level of information had been obtained earlier (by F. Barth), so I wish only to add a few remarks.

1. According to the data obtained on the spot from local officers, the Kohistan District west of the Indus has, according to the last census (1961), a surprisingly large population. There is a population of 130,000 living in the north administered from Dasu, and 210,000 in the south with its centre in Patan, making in all 340,000 inhabitants.

Biddulph however reported for Duber 1500, for Patan 5000, for Seo 400 and for Kandia 1500 "fighting men". Considering the number of fighting men normally in one family, one could estimate the total population in those days to have been between 30,000 and 40,000.

This certainly indicates a demographic explosion, supported perhaps by the fact that maize has replaced most of the other crops, namely barley and millet. This enabled more people to be fed from the same land.

There are, however, many "menial castes" in Kohistan -- weavers, carpenters, blacksmiths and doms, used respectively as barbers, messengers and minstrels. Apart from these, there are many Gujurs, who take care of the cattle. Such groups had no matrimonial ties with the Kohistanis and were not allowed to bear arms.

Taking Biddulph's figures with the above in view, it could be conjectured that the population was always more dense than presumed.



2. In the Linguistic Survey of India (Vol VIII/2, pp. 522 ff.), the language of the valleys west of the Indus is referred to as Maiyā. This name is unknown to the present speakers, they call their idiom "Kohistanī" or, in some places, "Khili". There are, however, two dialects of "Khili":

One dialect called Manzari is spoken in Kandia/Utur and in Duber. The two places are rather far apart from one another -- forty miles as the crow flies, but their high meadows are closer to each other. This is typical of Kohistan. Half the year is spent in the alpine zone, where economic and cultural contacts occur. The winter, spent in the gloomy confines of the lower valleys, is a time of isolation.

The other dialect, Mani, is spoken in all the other valleys, even between Kandia and Duber. The larger valleys speaking the dialect are Seo, Kayal, Patan, Jijal, Ranulla (a side-valley of Duber) and the area northwest of Besham, where Bankhar (also referred to as Bankhat) is the most prominent settlement (Biddulph 1977:12 mentions it as Bunkar). The villagers of Bankari in Tangir who speak Kanyawālī most probably originated from there (Buddruss 1959:7).

The dialects are so interlocked that it makes no sense to call one of them "Eastern" and the other "Western". There must be some connection between Mani-Manzari and the rather enigmatic term Maiyā (Buddruss 1959:5), which also appears in Biddulph's work (1880/1977:12) as Maiyon.

It may be mentioned that according to some informants, some of the Jalkotis winter in the valleys on the other (western) side of the Indus. This would mean an intrusion of Shins into the otherwise compact linguistic area of Khili between Utur and Bankhar.

The state of affairs on the other side of the Indus is even more enigmatic for obvious reasons. Here the impact of new political and economic developments came only after the building of the Indus road, which later was transformed into the Karakorum Highway, the construction of which latter was openly resisted in some places. Only the facilities created by the Kohistan Development

Board taught the locals to appreciate the benefits of civilization.

It is clear that the majority of the population on this side (more than 220,000) speak Shina, but their culture differs considerably from that of their bretheren in other parts of the vast territory where this most widespread language of the Western Himalayas is spoken -- from Chitral to Ladakh.

The reason became obvious after a few interviews. This population has felt the full impact of Pashtun influence. Their kinship groups are thus called "khels", and - even more important - they (the Shina-speakers of the Indus) have adopted the famous Vesh system. This system entails the exchange and redivision of cultivable land at regular intervals, thus creating the economic basis for an egalitarian society. Such Vesh systems always have an inherent problem: should the land be divided in equal shares to all males ("Tang Vesh"), or should it be given to the khels in equal amounts? In the latter case, some khels sometimes have only a few members, while others are numerically stronger. Inevitably, the "proletarians", i.e., the producers of many children, favour the former solution, while others resist because they wish to preserve the larger shares possible in the second solution because they did not have so many sons in the past. In some areas, the Vesh system has not been in practice for a long time and is half-forgotten, but in areas where the population exploded and there is scarcity of land (as in Palas), the question was raised whether Tang-Vesh should be reintroduced or not.

The interesting fact is that the propagators of Islam apparently brought with them the Vesh system. They were thus not only religious but also social reformers, introducing some sort of Islamic social order.

The situation is rendered more complex by the fact that the Shina-speakers are divided into two caste-like groups, Shin and Veshkun, both apparently of different ethnic origin. In Palas, the Veshkun seem to be practically identical to the Daram Khel,

which encompasses almost half of the landowners, subdivided of course into many smaller units. Have they something to do with the Diramiting, one of the most important "tribes" of Hunza? It has been said that they came from Jaglot on the mouth of the Sai Valley, where they allegedly still have relatives.

Kolai however has only real Shins, not counting the craftsmen (which were in the central areas of the Shina-speakers lumped together in the castes of "kamin" and "dom"). This anomaly was already known to Biddulph.

It would be false to consider Jalkot, Palas and Kolai each as a valley as suggested by the large-scale maps of the area. Jalkot was originally a village, Palas and Kolai are in fact communities, as Biddulph correctly observed. They (the people of Palas and Kolai) consider as their principal territory the large tracts of summer fields and meadows 2000 metres above sea-level and higher. These high meadows and fields are not divided by difficult ridges or high passes, although they are drained by rivulets joining the Indus at considerable distances from one another. Only in winter does the population concentrate itself in the valleys near the Indus.

Biddulph mentioned the surprising fact that besides Shina, three other languages are spoken in the area. One of them, Chiliss, is certainly still alive, and one vocabulary of it was collected in Jalkot. It is close to the Shina spoken by all immediate neighbours, but there is some similarity to the Khili dialects spoken on the other side of the river. This corresponds to the report by Biddulph concerning their immigration (the "Chiliss or Galo people") from the southwest. Socially, they are completely integrated into the community of the surrounding Shina-speakers.

Another language called Gowro by Biddulph could not be traced. There exists a group called the "Gabaré" (also called Gabar Khel), but our informants denied a linguistic separateness for them.

There was however a universal consensus among all that in the

village of Batera, a strange language incomprehensible to outsiders is still spoken. Biddulph mentioned this while confessing his inability to provide a suitable sample for his book. We were thus eager to include a sample of the language in our lexico-statistical lists.

It turned out that Batera is very near to Besham, just on the other (eastern) side of the Indus river, a few kilometres upstream. We received the required words for our lists from students of Batera attending schools at Besham. Later, we boarded a skin-raft and crossed over to Batera, an operation quite comfortable in winter, but somewhat risky in summer when the Indus is in high flood.

In Batera, we got the surprising information that the number of Batervi-speakers is much higher than we had expected -- between 25,000 and 30,000 (Biddulph reported only about 120 houses). Their territory is limited in the north by the Lorin stream, and to the south by the Pashtu-speaking Allāiwāls.

The people of Batera firmly believe that their forefather Machok came from Chilas, where he was ousted by his own brother Butá after heavy fighting.

This may well be true, because there is a well-known legend in Chilas (quoted by Biddulph 1880:16) that " a disastrous war broke out between two brothers, Bôt and Matchuk, which ended in the defeat and expulsion of all the partisans of the latter."

The place where Machok settled was formerly populated by Hindus, but it is not quite clear whether they were killed or expelled, or had even beforehand withdrawn to less hostile areas.

The location of their deserted settlements and graves were shown to us from a great distance, but we could not convince our hosts to lead us to the spot. In the lower part of Kohistan, there is a common belief that the Hindus hid vast treasures when they left. It would thus be unwise to encourage foreigners who are inevitably suspect as treasure-hunters!



The legend of origin, romantic as it is, would provide a suitable explanation to the general character of the vocabularies collected from the people of Batera. There is a considerable similarity to Shina, a lesser likeness to Mani and Manzari, and some deviant words, perhaps indicative of a substratum adopted from earlier (non-Dardic?) settlers.

Whatever the case, Batervi is a challenge to scholars, a challenge so far not taken up. Batera was visited allegedly only once by foreigners two years ago. I do not know whether this party made a linguistic survey preceding our own rather sketchy attempt. There is perhaps still a chance of discovering a hitherto unknown Aryan language.

Conclusively, I would like to add a few words about the history of Indus Kohistan. Very little is known about it and no written sources are available, but a comparison with peoples speaking related languages provides an attempted reconstruction in order to explain some peculiar and even strange customs of the present.

Between the plains and the large valley systems in the centre of the mountains (Chitral, Yasin, Gilgit, Baltistan), where kingdoms flourished and horses were used intensively for warfare, there existed a zone of smaller independent communities whose defenders fought on foot. To this zone belong the tribes on both sides of the lower Kunar valley, Dir Kohistan, Swat Kohistan and finally, Indus Kohistan. Geographers ask why just this zone was so difficult for foreign conquerors; the slippery slopes of the forested mountains were apparently even more forbidding than the barren ridges in the interior of the mountains. The Indus below Sazin crosses this zone, but there was never any major trade route along its course.

Nevertheless, the Pashtuns (themselves fighting on foot) divided into many khels became a serious threat, dispersing and absorbing a large part of the local population. This movement finally came to a standstill and a sort of equilibrium resulted. Before

this happened, Islam spread over all of Kohistan along with Pashtun institutions such as Vesh and the Pashtun value system. We may presume that during the previous period, women enjoyed a considerable independence and even looseness, which had to come to an end with the new order.

A further change took place a hundred years ago, when Kohistan was practically surrounded by British-controlled territories. Major wars between whole villages or even communities became obsolete. Biddulph had reported about a war between Palas and Kolai, resulting in raids on each other every two or three months. Such a form of conflict presupposes a considerable internal solidarity.

As soon as such external activities declined, the internal tensions and feuds increased. It became fashionable to kill and die for the land, but even more so for the women, who had become a precious and sometimes rather rebellious property.. Revenge was taken even after a very long time.

When the Wali of Swat and the Government of Pakistan sent their police into the valleys, they found what one of my former interpreters referred to as a "killing system", i.e., a system of multiple interlaced feuds which placed a considerable stress on the whole population.

A radical break with the murderous recent past is possible only with the shift of interest towards the economic sphere, towards employment in the administration and in the armed forces. The valleys must be opened by new roads to accomplish this. In this respect, the Kohistan Development Board is the most effective instrument of cultural change.

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